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Nicaragua: the next big fund fight

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After the bruising battle for the MX, the Reagan administration faces a tougher fight against longer odds in its effort next month to win renewed support from Congress for the contra guerrillas in Nicaragua.

Although the $14 million in requested covert aid is peanuts compared to the cost of large missiles, the consequences of defeat on this issue would reverberate into the future and could do lasting damage to the capacity of the United States to defend the approaches to its southern border.

As the administration wheels its big guns into line for a sustained lobbying campaign to win over a reluctant and divided Congress, it has one advantage in the fact that the leadership of the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA are genuinely united in the belief that this is one fight they can't afford to lose.

There is virtual unanimity in the top reaches of the Reagan foreign policy establishment on the serious dangers involved in a decision to leave the Sandinista regime and its Cuban advisers in unchallenged control of Nicaragua. A congressionally mandated termination of the promised aid would send a clear signal throughout the region that the United States is prepared to accept a Marxist regime heavily armed by the Soviets in the heart of Central America.

Although the leaders of the guerrilla resistance claim they would continue the fight, they recognize that the definitive withdrawal of American support would have a disastrous effect on their morale and effectiveness. With the contras reduced to occasional border raids, the restraining force of a growing, armed insurgency would be removed from the Sandinistas, with results that are only too easy to predict.

As well-informed State Department officers point out, the collapse of the guerrilla resistance would remove the only incentive the Sandinistas have for allowing the democratic pluralism they once promised and for permitting the free elections which are the basic objective of the contras.

The recognized leader-in-exile of the Democratic parties and unions that still survive inside Nicaragua, Arturo Cruz, has made an urgent plea for the United States not to cut its aid to the contras so long as the Soviets and Cubans are continuing to arm the Sandinistas. It is the unilateral nature of the proposed American withdrawal that so alarms our regional friends and allies.

The House Democratic leaders who oppose continued covert assistance argue that the regional consequences of the cutoff can be readily contained by a continued program of overt economic and military aid to Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. But this attempt to build a *cordon sanitaire* around a Marxist Nicaragua is not likely to succeed.

As a Salvadoran diplomat explained, "We are totally dependent on the aid given by the United States to the contras." Once the Sandinistas are relieved of having to cope with the contra guerrillas, they will be able to pour additional arms and trained manpower into the Salvadoran civil war to help the Communist guerrillas. For Napoleon Duarte's government, the conflict will be prolonged and the risk of losing will be much greater.

Many House Democrats seem to be under the peculiar illusion that a large-scale program of economic assistance to Central America can succeed even as the United States is pulling the rug out from under a guerrilla movement that it initially encouraged. To think this gambit could succeed requires one to believe that Harry Truman could have launched the Marshall Plan successfully by allowing the Communist Party to take over France.

A drift toward accommodation with the Sandinista dictatorship on the part of Nicaragua's democratic neighbors would be inevitable as they watched the withdrawal of American support. In the backwash of defeated contras and fleeing refugees, panic-stricken flight of private capital in Central America to Miami would undermine the U.S. attempt to shore up the economies in the region.

As the administration tries to make its case on the Hill, the new chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, Sen. Dave Durenberger, R-Minn., has not been particularly helpful. In an appearance this week before the National Press Club, Mr. Durenberger opposed the renewal of covert assistance and proposed, instead, reliance on joint action with our Latin neighbors under the Rio Treaty. But the senator neglected to mention that there is little likelihood of the majority support required for such action in view of the active opposition of Mexico, Brazil, and other nations.

The most compelling argument at the administration's disposal is the fact that aid to the contras now is the best insurance against having to intervene directly with U.S. armed forces at a later date, when the entire region is threatened by an expanding Communist offensive.

In the light of history, the burden of proof is on those who say the Sandinistas will not attempt to spread their revolution.

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